

INTERNET TECHNOLOGY

State's 911 service a national model

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Rhode Island's status as the only state to own its 911 system is good news to people who use a broadband Internet connection to make their telephone calls.

In most states, phone companies own the 911 network, and since those systems were designed more than 20 years ago, many recognize only local phone numbers. Voice-over Internet Protocol users who call 911 typically don't have access to enhanced 911, a feature that allows emergency dispatchers to automatically see on computer screens the address of a 911 call and a callback number. E911 allows help to be sent quickly even if a person gets disconnected or cannot tell the operator what's wrong or give directions to their location.

Rhode Island officials worked with Edison, N.H.-based Vonage, a VoIP company, to make E911 accessible to Internet callers in the Ocean State.

In other states, if a VoIP customer calls 911, the call is directed to an administrative line at the nearest public safety agency instead of the 911 operator line.

But Rhode Island 911 officials recognized that risk and took steps to mitigate it. And as a result, the Ocean State is the first in the country whose VoIP users can call 911 and have all their pertinent information appear in the call center.

"When VoIP first came out, I was concerned, as was the FCC because there was no caller information the call center would receive as we do from a land line or wireless," said Ray LaBelle, executive director of Rhode Island Emergency Telephone. "The first VoIP call we received was from a woman in Tiverton and no caller information appeared on the screen."

Following the first call, LaBelle brought in his technical advisor and representatives from Vonage to assess the problem. Together, they modified the system so callback information is displayed when Internet callers phone 911.

"Now if you use the Internet to call 911 in Rhode Island, we'll be able to find you," LaBelle said.

Brooke Schulz, senior vice president of corporate communications at Vonage, said Rhode Island made several phone lines available that would allow the caller information of VoIP customers calling 911 within the state's borders to appear at the call center.

VoIP customers can make calls from different addresses using the same phone number.

"Rhode Island (designed a system) that sends calls into the 911 system and displays the phone number and address that call is coming from regardless of the address," Schulz said. "In most cases around the country, the 911 system can only understand seven-digit, local phone numbers coming from land lines." Most systems have been modified, however, so that cellular callers' information is available to dispatchers.

"The E911 network was designed in the 1970s when there was only one phone company and it was designed to recognize seven digits," Schulz said.

Larger phone companies have little incentive to modify their systems to make VoIP and E911 work easily, Schulz said.

"The Rhode Island case is unique because the state owns and operates the 911 network and they can work with us directly," Schulz said. VoIP calling was introduced here in April 2004. By October, LaBelle, his team and Vonage had corrected the problem.

The only other location in the country where VoIP customers can call 911 and have all their information displayed in the call center, Schulz said, is New York City. That service went active in mid-July.

Most VoIP customers can call 911 and register their number and location with the VoIP provider, which in turn routes the call to the emergency center nearest that address. If the customer uses their phone number at another location and calls 911 – and hasn't notified the VoIP company they're at a different location – the call is directed to the original address.

Except in Rhode Island.

"We get the latitude and longitude of where you are," LaBelle said.

Rhode Islanders who used VoIP to call 911 before the system was updated were lucky. LaBelle said those callers were able to tell 911 operators where they were and received help. ■